Self-Correction and Rewriting of Student Compositions: The Correction Code

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After spending hours correcting student compositions, we are often disappointed when we return papers to our students, only to see them glance at their grade and tuck them away in a book or notebook. We may wonder what, if anything, they have learned from their work. In my years of teaching writing to intermediate and advanced learners of English as a second or foreign language, I have found that the use of a correction code to guide students in correcting their own errors makes writing more of a learning activity. Using the correction code does not make marking papers more efficient, but it does provide students with an opportunity to learn from their mistakes and to gain confidence in their ability to write.

Sample Correction Code

SYMBOL	TYPE OF ERROR
cap	capitalization
P	punctuation
SP	spelling
^	add a word
( )	optional
#	number (singular or plural)
SV	subject-verb agreement
VT	verb tense
VF	verb form (gerund, participle, etc.)
WC	word choice
WF	word form (noun, verb, adjective, adverb, etc.
WO	word order
frag	sentence fragment
RO	run-on sentence
?	unclear

Student Attitudes Toward Self-correction and Rewriting

Self-correction and rewriting has proven successful in both ESL and EFL settings. At the University of Kansas, where I (along with other colleagues) first employed this technique, I found it was not only educational but motivational as well. Students enjoyed looking back at their rewritten compositions (rewrites) and comparing them with their first drafts (originals). In

some classes, teachers even compiled students' favorite rewrites in a "memory book," which was presented to students at the end of the term.

At the University of Veszprem the students in my "language improvement" classes have also enjoyed the benefits reaped by correcting their own errors and rewriting their work. Initially, there is a bit of resistance at having to rewrite an assignment, but most students agree they learn much more if they have a chance to correct their own work. Learning from our mistakes is the philosophy behind using the correction code to aid students in rewriting their compositions. Fear of making mistakes and fear of failure are factors that impede language learning. Rather than viewing errors as a sign of failure, students in my classes begin to see that errors provide wonderful opportunities for learning and for improving their written language.

The Benefits of Self-correction and Rewriting

In ESL/EFL writing classes teachers typically have two aims in mind: developing fluency and developing accuracy. We help develop our students' fluency in writing by providing plenty of opportunities for them to express ideas on paper. To help develop accuracy, we correct student errors, offer constructive criticism and suggestions, and provide remedial exercises when necessary.

In providing opportunities for our students to write we should ask ourselves what we expect from them in terms of their written work-quantity or quality? Quantity will get students more comfortable in using the language, but quality is an important issue as well. Self-correction of student work addresses these issues: fluency and accuracy, as well as quantity and quality.

Besides providing students with opportunities to develop both fluency and accuracy in the written language, self-correction and rewriting helps "wean" students from dependency on the teacher for correction. The teacher is available to answer questions and to help students whenever necessary, but he/she allows them to first figure out on their own the reason for their errors and how they can correct them. Putting more of the responsibility on students for correction develops a sense of self-sufficiency. It boosts their confidence, particularly when they compare their rewrites to the originals and can clearly see the improvement they have made. Students become more active participants in their own learning and in helping classmates to learn. It has been my experience that students will first consult one another when they have a question about their compositions before turning to the teacher for help.

Self-correction and rewriting helps the teacher to individualize instruction. He/ she can jot down constructive suggestions, explanations, and examples and even prescribe remedial exercises on each student's paper. If all the students in a class have written a composition on the same topic, it may happen that some of them have made similar errors in word choice or verb tense, for example. Immediately after returning the students' papers to rewrite, the teacher can call their attention to these errors and provide examples and explanations for the entire class.

Drawbacks

Although the benefits of this technique far outweigh the drawbacks, there are a few disadvantages. First of all, there is initial resistance on the part of some students to having to rewrite their work. Some find it tedious and time-consuming. It is true that initially it does take more time for students to correct and rewrite their work, as they must get acquainted with the correction code and get accustomed to figuring out how to correct their errors on their own. And because students are working on the same assignment twice, there will be fewer assignments. However, the adage "It's quality not quantity" holds true.

Procedure

At the beginning of the term I give each student a copy of the correction code that we will use in the course. If duplicating facilities are not available, teachers can put the correction code on the blackboard for students to copy on the first day of class. (A sample correction code is provided at the end of this article.) Students are asked to keep the correction code handy so they can refer to it when rewriting their compositions. Because there will be student interaction and the teacher will need to circulate among the students, it would be ideal to arrange desks or tables in a circle or semicircle. I've found it most convenient to have students write their originals on a piece of paper and to write their rewrites in a small notebook. Students should leave a space between lines for the teacher to write in correction symbols and comments.

While students are working on their rewrites, the teacher circulates among them. He/she should not hover over students but "blend into" the background. The teacher should allow students to help each other and should step in to offer help only when it is clear they need an explanation or assistance. An entire class period should be spent the first time or two that students rewrite a composition. It will take them time to get used to the symbols in the correction code and to get used to correcting and rewriting their compositions on their own. Later on, the teacher may wish to allow 10 minutes at the end of class to hand back originals and have students look over them and ask questions about errors the teacher has marked. Students can then complete their rewrites as homework.

Summary

Self-correction and rewriting of student compositions provides students with an opportunity to learn from their mistakes. It instills in them feelings of self-sufficiency and success and allows them to take a more active role in their own learning. While initially students may be reluctant to spend time rewriting a composition they might prefer to simply put away in a book and forget about, they come to see the benefits gained from rewriting and improving their written work.